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RIYADH PLEASE PASS TO DHAHRAN; DEPARTMENT FOR HERRO MUSTAFA
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TAGS: PREL PHUM KISL KPAL SG SA
SUBJECT: ENGAGING THE OIC: A STRATEGY FOR THE NEW SPECIAL
ENVOY

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Classified By: Consul General Tatiana C. Gfoeller for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶11. (S) SUMMARY: Building on Post's unprecedented and steadily increasing interaction with the OIC during the past two years, Post has learned much of OIC Secretary General Ihsanoglu's intentions and how he has shaped and will continue to influence the OIC agenda. During his tenure, Ihsanoglu has focused on raising the OIC's profile as well as tackling issues (e.g. fostering intra-OIC trade, addressing "Islamophobia," and combating terrorism) outlined in the OIC's 2005 Ten-Year Program of Action. The upcoming 11th OIC Summit in Dakar will be the first OIC Summit at which Heads of State will gather since the OIC presented its Ten-Year Program of Action and will include a review of the 1969 OIC Charter. As a result, the OIC will continue campaigning strongly to present the OIC as a moderate institution with an Islamic perspective while pursuing internal reform. Regarding cooperation with the U.S., Ihsanoglu and other high-level OIC officials have expressed consistently to the Ambassador and the Consul General a keen desire to work more closely with the U.S. Government in general, and an Envoy, in particular. END SUMMARY.

MAKING THE OIC RELEVANT ON THE WORLD STAGE

¶12. (S) Elected OIC Secretary General three years ago -- Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu -- a former Turkish professor, writer, and diplomat, has tried to raise the profile of the Organization. In his first meeting with CG Gfoeller, shortly after his investiture, Ihsanoglu stated plainly that he saw his election as a mandate for reform, for "finally making the OIC relevant on the world stage." He shared with the CG two concrete suggestions -- the creation of a "Muslim free trade zone" and the establishment of a campaign against "Islamophobia" -- both of which are included in the 2005 Ten-Year Program of Action that the 57 member states will review at the upcoming 11th OIC Summit in Dakar.

ESTABLISHING A "MUSLIM FREE TRADE ZONE"

¶13. (S) One of Ihsanoglu's major goals is to establish a "Muslim free trade zone" whereby OIC member states would trade freely amongst themselves. According to Ihsanoglu, such an approach would make the OIC relevant to its member states and their populations and would increase said populations' standards of living. The goal of the OIC is to increase intra-OIC trade from 14% to 20% by 2015. To that end, the OIC's International Development Bank (IDB) has undertaken studies on how to finance trade, participated in trade fairs, and organized seminars on capacity building

(e.g. November 2007 forum on enhancing cotton sector cooperation among OIC countries). Last November the IDB established the International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation in order to consolidate the IDB's trade finance activities.

COMBATING "ISLAMOPHOBIA"

¶4. (S) Another top priority for Ihsanoglu is to strengthen the OIC campaign of equating anti-Semitism and all other forms of racial and other discrimination with "Islamophobia."

In his initial meeting with the CG, Ihsanoglu was not able to define this rather vague concept, besides attributing to it anything perceived as offensive to or critical of Muslims.

For example, he described to the CG as "Islamophobic" both the publications of the Danish Mohammed cartoons and the West's condemnation of Muslims' violent reactions to them.

¶5. (U) OIC efforts to tackle the issue of "Islamophobia," include a September 2006 Islamic Conference of Information Ministers as well as various speaking engagements in the U.S. and around the world. Most recently in September 2007, OIC Secretary General Ihsanoglu spoke at Georgetown University

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before foreign dignitaries, media representatives, and Georgetown staff and faculty, on the role of media in "Islamic World-West" relations. In order to correct misperceptions about Islam, he argued for measures such as a code of conduct for and closer dialogue/cooperation among media professionals as well as a media monitoring initiative.

"ISLAMOPHOBIA" AND TERRORISM

¶6. (U) Ihsanoglu's concern over "Islamophobia" has led him to consider the relationship between that phenomenon and terrorism and try to do something about it. Of the OIC's initiatives to combat terrorism, high-level officials highlight as their most prominent accomplishment the November

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2007 International Conference on Terrorism. This was the first time that the OIC organized jointly an event with the United Nations. The objective, as noted in UN Secretary General Bi Ki-Moon's opening remarks at the Conference, was to implement the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted by the UN General Assembly in September 2006. The conference produced a document entitled "Concluding Observations" in which the OIC reiterates its calls for the international community to prevent the spread of "Islamophobia." The OIC believes that international terrorism has created a poor understanding of Islam, resulting in intolerance of and discrimination against Muslims.

REFINING IDEAS ON TOLERANCE

¶7. (S) In tandem with the above developments, Ihsanoglu began to refine his vague ideas about post-9/11 tolerance -- in significant measure prodded by Post's steadily increasing interaction with him (and possibly more importantly) with a host of lower-level OIC functionaries. As mentioned before, the OIC is headquartered in Saudi Arabia, but not just anywhere in Saudi Arabia. Jeddah, the home turf it shares with Post, certainly has religious significance as the age-old gateway to the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina. However, it is also by far the most cosmopolitan of the Kingdom's cities, having benefited from centuries of trade as the Red Sea's most significant port and melting pot among multi-national and multi-ethnic pilgrims from the farthest corners of the Muslim community. Moreover, it is the capital of the liberal Hejaz region, a former kingdom only incorporated into the Al Saud monarchy after the First World War. Tolerance and inter-faith understanding may not be on the minds of most Saudis, but of the few who do understand and even support the concepts, most by far live in the Hejaz. It appears that this more mellow atmosphere -

coupled with a new Secretary General who was already leaning in that direction - had had an impact on the OIC, from the top on down.

OIC DECLARATIONS MORE IN LINE WITH US POLICY

¶18. (S) Secretary General Ihsanoglu reacted to this by issuing a number of extremely helpful declarations. Over the past three years the OIC has increasingly issued declarations including ever-more frequent condemnations of terrorism to statements supporting internationally accepted human rights, women's rights, the environment, and a host of other concerns that directly concern the USG. For example, on October 12, 2007, Secretary General Ihsanoglu issued a statement celebrating Human Rights Day, launching activities to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and announcing plans to consider creating an independent permanent human rights body. (NOTE: In recent conversations with OIC officials, Consulate General Jeddah learned that the OIC is establishing a human rights office. END NOTE.)

OIC CAPTURES ATTENTION OF US AND EUROPE

¶19. (S) As the OIC's voice became more responsible on the world stage, European and USG officials began to pay more attention to it, thus reinforcing the OIC's relevance. Ihsanoglu was extremely proud and pleased to forge a relationship with Under Secretary Nicholas Burns, to participate with Secretary Rice at the Sharm al-Sheikh summit, to host Ambassador Fraker at his Jeddah Headquarters, and finally to welcome the creation of the post of U.S. OIC Special Envoy, first through Post and then through a personal telephone call with the Secretary.

PLANS FOR OIC IMPROVEMENT AND SUGGESTIONS FOR STRONGER US-OIC RELATIONS

¶10. (S) Ihsanoglu knows that not only does his organization need more legitimacy, it also needs more professionalism. He admitted as much to the CG, lamenting his staff's lack of professionalism with the words, "They are all retired ambassadors who needed to be given a sinecure." Post has already begun to address this lacuna in a modest way by organizing the first-ever OIC senior officials' IVLP program. However, as we obtain more from the OIC, we could offer more, for example:

-- A professional training initiative for lower and mid-level OIC officials in the United States, perhaps in coordination with Human Rights Watch and other relevant NGOs;

-- Assigning a junior to mid-level FSO to OIC Headquarters in

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Jeddah on an "internship." This would have the virtue of both demonstrating to OIC officials American professionalism and getting us increased access to the OIC's decision-making process at the working level and from inside the organization;

-- Eventually, if circumstances warranted, the USG might apply for OIC observer status on the strength of our sizable Muslim minority. This would have the virtue of cementing our outreach to the world Islamic community as well as helping us to keep a closer eye on potential trouble-making observers, such as Russia.

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